

Charles Chauncy (1705-1787)

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No Date

During the first hundred years of New England Church History, the minds of the ministers were so much engrossed with problems of Church Government, and the relation of the Church to the political problems, and the state, that we may make a general statement to the effect that the theology remained that which is expressed in the Westminster Confession, adopted in 1648 at the same time that the Cambridge Platform was adopted. True indeed it is that there had been some agitation concerning Baptism and Communion, but this was upon the side of polity, and not of theology.

The Charter of 1692 had severed the relations of the state and the church, and taken from the clergy much of the influence that they once exercised, and left them to interest themselves in problems that were more theological in their nature. To be sure we have seen evidences of a new habit of thought at work, which had divided the country into two general parties, the conservative, and liberal. But so busy were these men with questions of polity, that they had no opportunity to apply their habits of mind to theological problems. Even John Wise hardly thought of dealing with his Calvinism in precisely the same manner that he did with his "Sixteen Proposals."² But a change was coming, as a natural result of new conditions.

Perhaps it would be well for us to recall the "Five Points of Calvinism," for our interests are now turning from questions of

¹ The manuscripts in this series covering early New England Congregational preachers have no date. They are hand-written, dating them before Earl Davis started typing his manuscripts in 1907. So, they date either from his time at Harvard University, or the first year or two of his ministry in Pittsfield.

² See Davis' brief account of John Wise here https://commons.clarku.edu/history_manuscripts_3/1/. Also, John Wise was the subject for Davis' thesis written to obtain his S.T.B. degree from the Harvard Divinity School; see <https://commons.clarku.edu/education/2/>.

Government to questions of Theology. (1) God elects individuals to be saved. (2) He designs complete redemption for these only. (3) Fallen man is of himself incapable of true faith and repentance. (4) God's grace is efficacious for the salvation of the elect. (5) A soul once regenerated and converted is never ultimately lost.

But the hard lines of this system were being weathered away. (1) The greater freedom of the New World made traditions less binding. (2) Democratic ideas were developing very rapidly. (3) There was a tinge of Fatalism in early days, e.g., Cotton Mather.

By about 1725 there began to appear many ideas that were not strictly Calvinistic. Whatever these ideas, they were all branded with one name "Arminian." In 1726 Cotton Mather³ said no minister could be found in N.E. who held Arminian views. But in 1736 Johnathan Edwards⁴ says that it was appearing in New England. In 1750 Edwards says that there is danger that the young generation would come entirely under the influence of Arminianism.

In comparison with Calvinism above defined, we may notice the changed attitude by calling to mind what one commonly called "the five points of Arminianism." (1) Conditional election. (2) Universal redemption, i.e., Christ died for all alike, but only those who accept his atonement by faith will be actually saved. (3) Salvation by Grace, or that man can exercise true faith only by the regenerating grace of the Holy Spirit with which grace however, he can cooperate. (4) Grace [is] not irresistible. (5) Falling from a state of grace is possible. The general tendency of this new movement is seen in two of its ideas. (1) It places greater emphasis upon man. (2) It emphasized means of grace, i.e., education and character as [a] means of salvation.

These two tendencies represent the development of a liberal, and an orthodox party within the Christian Church of New England. The conservative branch is represented by Johnathan Edwards and his followers. The liberal branch, or moderate

³ See Davis' brief account of Cotton Mather here https://commons.clarku.edu/history_manuscripts_3/2/.

⁴ See Davis' brief account of Jonathan Edwards here https://commons.clarku.edu/history_manuscripts_3/5/.

branch, is represented by Chas. Chauncy, and terminated in the Unitarian body. For the present we shall follow the movements taking as the leader Chas. Chauncy, Pastor of the 1st Church of Boston.

Chauncy was born in 1705, in the year that Cotton Mather issued the sixteen proposals. Died in 1787. His father was a merchant, his grandfather was 2nd President of Harvard. He graduated from Harvard in 1721. Was ordained pastor of 1st Church [of Boston in] 1727.

His life in so far as it concerns the thought movement with which we are concerned centers about three controversies. (1) Revival controversy. (2) Episcopal controversy. (3) Theological controversy.

A little insight into the kind of man Chauncy was, is seen in the following written by a friend,

He was, like Zacchaeus, little of stature. God gave him a slender feeble body, a very powerful vigorous mind, and strong passions; and he managed them all exceedingly well. His manners were plain and downright, dignified, bold, and imposing. In conversation with his friends he was pleasant, social, and very instructive. (Walker's *Ten N.E. Leaders*, p. 273).⁵

The New England of the time of Chauncy was not the New [England] of 50 or 75 years before, and Boston perhaps more than any other town reflected this change. The town authorities, for instance, reported to the general court in 1735 that Boston had become the resort of all sorts of poor people, which instead of adding to the wealth of the town, serve only as a burden and a continual charge.

Religiously estimated, Boston was not what it had been in the days of the founders. The old Puritan enthusiasm had departed... [W]ealth, commercial interests, and the presence of a foreign office holding class had largely

⁵ Williston Walker, 1901, *Ten New England Leaders*, Boston: Silver, Burdett and Co., p. 273. Williston Walker (1860-1922) was an American church historian; born in Portland, Maine, he graduated from Amherst College in 1883 and the Hartford Theological Seminary in 1886, and in Leipzig where he earned a PhD in 1888. He taught at the Hartford Seminary from 1889 to 1901, at which point he took a position at Yale University

defined religion of its original primacy in popular interest. (Walker's *Ten N.E. Leaders*, p. 275).⁶ Whitefield, the evangelist, wrote in his journal of 1740, The Generality seem to be too much conformed to the world. There's much of the pride of life to be seen in their assemblies. Jewels, patches, and gay apparel are commonly worn by the female sex, and even the common people, I observed, dressed of in the Pride of life.⁷

Unto these conditions came Whitefield, and almost like a thunderstorm, he swept over this country in 1740, conducting revivals in all important places. He was a preacher of great power, and with a tremendous influence. Under his preaching the storm of religious enthusiasm which had been gathering force for 5 years or more burst upon the country with all the force of a cyclone. Many were converted, and some joined the church. It is alleged that there were 25 or 30 thousand converts. Perhaps their nature is seen in that on repeated occasions men cried out, and women fainted: many in the weeping congregations declared themselves converted.

This "Great Awakening" of 1740 gave rise to a very keen controversy which brought out the latent ideas of the clergy and made them show their colors. Chauncy was among those who condemned the revival. In 1743 he published a book under the title, "Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion" which treated of the revival.⁸

His objections rested chiefly upon two grounds. (1) He objected to itinerant preaching because it was uncongregational,

⁶ Williston Walker, 1901, *Ten New England Leaders*, Boston: Silver, Burdett and Co., p. 275.

⁷ Whitefield, as quoted in Williston Walker, 1901, *Ten New England Leaders*, Boston: Silver, Burdett and Co., p. 275. George Whitefield (1714-1770) English Anglican minister, one of the founders of the Methodism and the evangelical movement. He traveled through the American Colonies starting in 1738, and this quote is taken from a diary of his travels which is available online at <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/evans/N03934.0001.001/1:6.11?rgn=div2;view=fulltext>.

⁸ Charles Chauncy, 1743, *Seasonable Thoughts on the State of Religion in New England*, recently republished by FB&C Limited.

and then some of the lesser lights who followed Whitefield were guilty of many objectionable actions.

(2) He objected to the criticisms that the evangelists passed upon the clergy. In the Old South Church in Boston, Whitefield said,

[T]he Generality of Preachers talk of an unknown unfelt Christ. And the reason why congregations have been dead, is because dead men preach to them.⁹

At New Haven he preached on the dreadful "ill-consequences of an unconverted ministry." These words which became more bitter and vituperative as the controversy increased did not agree with men like Chauncy. In fact, Davenport,¹⁰ the last of the lot of evangelists became insane, and it seems that this cloud of insanity hangs over the whole movement.

This revival resulted in: (1) The loss of influence of the ministers. (2) The rise of Separated Churches, whose grounds of separation were precisely the same as the grounds upon which {??} Brown and others had stood for.¹¹ But here in New England 150 years later the New England Churches, the direct descendants of the early separatists oppose these new separatists.

(3) The third result of this revival was the emphasis it placed upon the emotional element of religion, and hence the old idea of the direct influence of God upon the soul of the Regenerate. It is on this point that Edwards is so strong. Chauncy held that these "new lights" as they were called do not

⁹ Whitefield, as quoted in Williston Walker, 1901, *Ten New England Leaders*, Boston: Silver, Burdett and Co., p. 278.

¹⁰ James Davenport (1716-1757) American congregational clergyman. Born in Stamford Connecticut, graduated from Yale in 1732.

¹¹ I am not certain who Davis refers to in this sentence. He likely is drawing from Williston Walker, 1901, *Ten New England Leaders*, Boston: Silver, Burdett and Co., who, on pages 298-9 writes of Briant and Brown among others: "And though Arianism was too radical a departure for any extensive rooting before the time of Edwards's death, it was distinctly advocated by Chauncy's neighbor in the Boston ministry, Jonathan Mayhew, in 1755, while his ministerial contemporaries, Lemuel Briant of Braintree, Ebenezer Gay and Daniel Shute of Highham, and John Brown of Cohasset were believed to sympathize with this denial of the Trinity."

stand the test, which the Bible as the fruit of the spirit makes upon them.

(4) Physical manifestations. Divided families. Neglect of duties etc. Chauncy had no sympathy with it.

The three important results were:

- (1) Sharp contrast drawn between the Calvinistic idea, or supernatural agency, and the Arminian idea, means of grace or education. Chauncy stood for [the] latter.
- (2) Second, drawing the lines between extreme and moderate Calvinists.
- (3) Among the moderates there was a renewed emphasis upon the Bible in opposition to immediate grace. This study of the Bible, this result is of no little importance, and in part prepared the way for the later movement of the 19th Century.